NTERPOINT

The Philip Morris External Research Program; Fig Leaf Optional

Phillip Gardiner

The newly created Philip Morris External Research Program (PMERP) is nothing more than a not too thinly veiled front for promoting the interests of Philip Morris (PM) in particular and the tobacco industry generally. PMERP is the latest incarnation of the Center for Indoor Air Research (CIAR), which was explicitly set-up to cloud the issues surrounding the harmful nature of environmental tobacco smoke (ETS). [1] The bottom line is that PMERP seeks to surround itself with the best possible scientists to give the public appearance of scientific and corporate responsibility. To strip Phillip Morris of its fig leaf, first I will examine the actual goals of the PMERP, next, examine use of good scientists for bad purposes, thirdly, locate the creation of the PMERP in the broader post-Master Settlement Agreement (MSA) offensive on the part of the tobacco industry and lastly suggest how scientists and funders can get involved in exposing and isolating Philip Morris.

PMERP: For Health or for Death?

"The Purpose of the Philip Morris External Research Program is to support the highest quality research that contributes to our fundamental scientific knowledge, helps address the concerns of the public health community regarding cigarette smoking, and enables Phillip Morris to continue its pursuit of product modification(s) or new product design(s) that might reduce the health risk of smoking."[2]

It is somewhat incredible to think that PM is concerned with the "highest quality that . . helps address the concerns of the public health community." PM and the tobacco industry generally have spent their entire corporate lives denying, deflecting and obfuscating the deadly truth about their product. Philip Morris has spent years attacking the public health community, so for them to turn around in 2000 and state that they are concerned with helping to address this community's concerns is not entirely believable. It must be borne in mind that, at the same time that the call for the PMERP appeared, PM was leading the fight to block any and all regulatory efforts that would force the tobacco industry to identify and disclose all constituents, chemicals and ingredients that are contained in the various brands of cigarettes. PM's successful blocking of the State of Massachusetts law that required disclosure of ingredients in cigarettes belies their newfound interest in the nation's health. [3] The supposed public health concerns that PMERP so boldly trumpets in its stated goals are severely circumscribed when its parent and the other tobacco companies will not even provide the basic information regarding the contents of its products for scientific analysis.

Moreover, Philip Morris has gone out of its way to hinder research that seeks to document the availability of tobacco to minors. The tobacco industry has sponsored legislation in several states making it illegal to conduct test purchases for research purposes (Mississippi House Bill No. 1268, South Dakota Senate Bill 189 as amended, and Official Code of Georgia, Climes and Offenses, Article 7, 16-12-175). [4] How is it possible that PMERP is concerned with "the highest quality research that contributes to our fundamental scientific knowledge" when its parent (PM) is pro-actively blocking tobacco use research among youth? Is PMERP really fit to conduct a research program when its benefactor, Philip Morris, has been and remains the main impediment to tobacco-related disease and tobacco use research?

It is true that some peer-reviewed research funded by the CIAR was helpful in establishing the case that ETS is a seriously harmful and deadly pollutant.[5] On the other hand, much of the research sponsored by the CIAR came under the funding of "special projects." It seems highly likely, given the notorious history of tobacco industry funded research that PMERP will continue the "special projects" mechanism (read non-peer-reviewed), like its predecessor the CIAR. These "special projects" were the darlings of the tobacco executives. Tobacco industry documents clearly show that their role was to obfuscate issues surrounding the harmful effects of ETS and ultimately be used as a blunt instrument in Philip Morris' fight with the tobacco control movement.[6]

But probably the most disturbing aspect of PMERP's goals is not so much of what is said, but of what is not said. There is not one word about tobacco use being the number one preventable killer of human beings around the world. No mention that tobacco use is responsible for more than 400,000 deaths per year alone in the United States. [7] Researchers should question whether the goal of the PMERP to improve the public's health, or whether the goal of this program to advance the economic, political and scientific interests of Phillip Morris, the premier cigarette producer on the planet.

Jack Henningfield, in a personal correspondence, summed up the PMERP this way: "Can a meaningful research program to reduce the known health damage of tobacco be conceived without acknowledging that tobacco causes dependence, disease and death?" [8]

Scientific Legitimacy and Cover, PMERP's Real Goal

The principal reason for the establishment of the PMERP is for Philip Morris to gain scientific legitimacy that serves as a cover for their continued marketing and selling of disease and death around the planet. As an appendix to PMERP's call for applications, there are of over 100 scientists listed as potential peer-reviewers. Many

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Exclusionary Policies: Simplistic Approaches to Complex Issues?

Jeffrey Cheek

At first glance, it seems prudent for TRDRP to avoid all appearances of any association with individuals and/or institutions receiving funding from the tobacco industry. However, a fundamental principle for any research program is to ensure that the science it supports is both rigorous and impartial. TRDRP should indeed seek to minimize the risk of conflicts of interest between its researchers and the tobacco industry – and do so in a fair, unbiased manner so that the Program remains beyond reproach. Unfortunately, implementation of the policy recommended to TRDRP by the California Tobacco Education and Research Oversight Committee (TEROC) would fall short of these goals, as the recommended policy is not comprehensive and could promote distrust between health effects researchers and tobacco control professionals.

If TRDRP were to adopt a policy restricting eligibility for funding, what are the consequences for the Program or its stakeholders? The following details several concerns with the recommended policy and seeks to redress those issues that are excessively punitive and/or discriminatory.

A rose by any other name – it's still money from the tobacco industry

There are always potential conflicts of interest when any industry funnels money towards research focused on its commercial products. The example of pharmaceutical industry funding that either discourages or prevents publication of negative data illustrates just one of many concerns regarding commercial support of public health research.[1], also see *Policies and Positions of Other Organizations on the Controversy* in this newsletter). However, given the broad implications of industry funding and the influence it may buy the tobacco companies, a major limitation of the policy recommended to TRDRP is the sole focus on researchers who receive funding from the Phillip Morris External Research Program (PMERP). Essentially, this policy would target a select group of researchers with expertise in either pulmonary health effects of indoor air pollutants or environmental engineering/indoor air quality specialists. On the other hand, other individuals or entities receiving other (and often more controversial) support from the tobacco industry would be exempt from this ban. For example, there are TRDRP investigators who have served as expert witnesses for the tobacco industry; certainly this constitutes a direct (and potentially far more insidious) conflict of interest.

The rationale behind the limits of the recommended policy is that, by focusing on researchers directly supported by Phillip Morris (i.e. PMERP), TRDRP would not have to address the more subtle issues of secondary or privately arranged financial ties between the tobacco industry and TRDRP awardees. However, this spotlight on PMERP contrasts with the model for the proposed ban (i.e. the policy imposed by the California Tobacco Control Section (TCS) on its applicants), which specifies a far broader set of guidelines that discourages, for example, community-based organizations from accepting any form of support from the tobacco companies or their subsidiaries. Conversely, if TRDRP adopted the recommended policy, those receiving tobacco industry money from sources other than PMERP would be exempt from restrictions on TRDRP funding. At best, the proposed ban discriminates against health effects researchers and indoor air quality specialists; at worst, by casting suspicion on the validity of PMERP-sponsored research without proving it invalid, it is both unscientific and anti-democratic. It follows that an effective strategy to counter "influence peddling" by the tobacco industry must necessarily be comprehensive, particularly in recognition of past strategies employed by the industry's multiple fronts.

Get over it – public health has benefited from some industry-supported research

As noted in previous articles in this newsletter, research on the health effects of tobacco use (and particularly on secondhand smoke) have had an authoritative influence on public opinion and legislative and judicial action. What is easily overlooked is that such research has neither traditionally been, nor currently is, well funded by federal agencies. Over the last ten years, relatively few sources (including TRDRP and, yes, Phillip Morris via the CIAR) have provided funding for independent, peer-reviewed research on the health effects of exposure to secondhand smoke. A review of the studies cited in the California EPA report on this topic demonstrates that some of these projects received funding from CIAR.[2] The point here is not to justify the continued use of industry-sponsored funding as provided through PMERP. Indeed, the industry has shown that nothing comes free, *viz.*, Phillip Morris used CIAR as a mechanism to collapse their non-peer reviewed research projects – designed to challenge and contradict studies demonstrating any risks of exposure to secondhand smoke – with peer-reviewed studies conducted by reputable scientists focused on tobacco's health effects. Nevertheless, some of the health effects studies providing evidence in support of regulations that restrict public exposure to secondhand smoke did receive support from the industry.

There is also a discrepancy in TEROC's recommendation to TRDRP, as the committee has specified that TRDRP should prospectively focus on future PMERP grantees, but also should utilize the TCS policy as a model. However, the policy

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Too Bad It Is Not The End - A Leopard Can Not Change Its Spots

For the year 2000, after almost 50 years of tobacco industry's fronts (TIRC/CTR, ICIAR, and CIAR) created to carry out a very successful strategic public relations campaign to help fight its legal and legislative challenges, Philip Morris has established and funded the PMERP. The similarities between the PMERP and its predecessor (CIAR) clearly point to the continued practice by the tobacco industry in abducting the scientific process and discourse for its benefit. Given the changes in the war on tobacco after the MSA, the creation of the PMERP needs to be looked at from a broader perspective that includes, but not limited to, a strategic public relations campaign with science as its tool (*see article on Philip Morris, page 7*). In the case of PMERP, it is hard to believe that Philip Morris has changed its spots.

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of the researchers are well published in their respected fields. Additionally, most of these scientists are from well-known universities and research institutions. Harvard, University of California, University of Michigan, John Hopkins, the US EPA, Brookhaven National Laboratory and the NIH along with many others has employees participating in this endeavor.[2] Printing the scientists with the names of their institutions is done to give the illusion that the tobacco industry is involved in meaningful scientific collaboration.

While the before-mentioned institutions and many of the identified scientists don't subscribe to the intentions and/or views of the PMERP and the tobacco industry, still their association (however unintentional) lends credibility to these industry's endeavors. The tobacco industry says 'see, we have many of the leading members in the scientific communities working with us, we can not be all that bad'. The problem with this line of argumentation is that while PMERP is portraying itself as an equal partner in the pursuit of science, the reality is that the tobacco industry has historically used scientific research to confuse and distract the public from the underlying negative health consequences of their product. While PMERP is providing a scientific "photo op" for Philip Morris, the tobacco industry continues to sell products that are addictive, lead to serious disease, and in most cases cause premature death. Frankly, the funding of scientific endeavors to tease out the deadly processes involved in smoking and second hand smoke appears to be the last thing on Philip Morris' mind.

There are other curious issues surrounding the listing of scientists by PMERP. Most funding agencies don't publish their list of reviewers beforehand. Unlike the National Institutes of Health (NIH), where standing study section participants are listed as definite reviewers, PMERP list represents only *potential* reviewers at best. Moreover, some the researchers listed have publicly acknowledged that they were never asked if they would be peer reviewers.[9] Additionally, as distinct from the TRDRP, where a list of scientists who have actually reviewed the applications are posted for public scrutiny following each grant cycle, PMERP makes no mention of this possibility. The conclusion is inescapable: PMERP is blatantly projecting the good image of renowned scientists and institutions as a front for it's continued marketing and sales of disease and death.

PMERP: Part of the Post-MSA Offensive of the Tobacco Industry

In the hubbub that has surrounded the emergence of the PMERP, a central tenet has been lost. PMERP is but one tactic within the general offensive of the Master Settlement Agreement (MSA) era to reposition the tobacco industry as a kinder and gently, albeit profitable, conveyor of disease and death.

The MSA gave $206 billion to the States to end most lawsuits against the industry. With one stroke, the tobacco industry began to right its corporate ship and keep at bay even larger and more damaging lawsuits looming on the horizon. Simultaneously, the industry wrapped itself in a "new and softer" coat. Unfortunately, we have all become much too aware of and perhaps nauseated with the "new" socially responsible tobacco company: *"Working to make a difference. The people at Philip Morris."* Through an aggressive $150 million dollar year ad campaign[10], PM and its subsidiaries now want us to believe that they are the champions of battered women, poor African Americans, the homeless, flood victims and the shut-in. Italian love songs? *Give me a break!*

Additionally, the post-MSA Philip Morris wants to promote itself as a fighter against youth smoking. CARD, the youth anti-smoking campaign launched by PM and adopted by some retailers to check the identification of teens before selling them tobacco products, mainly has served the purpose to get Phillip Morris back on television. Moreover, industry marketers know that saying that your product is restricted to adults is a sure-fire way to attract teens.

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